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ABSTRACT

The evolution of writing systems of the Aramaic languages is discussed, stressing the importance of looking beyond simple character forms as they occur in space and time to the interaction of scripts with languages, and the interactions of writing systems with minds and civilizations. First, the invention of the alphabet is discussed from a linguistic point of view. Morphological, phonological, and sociolinguistic factors are considered. The Aramaic languages have existed over a long span of time, in a number of forms that have been written in a considerable variety of scripts, and at several critical junctures in the history of writing. (MSE)

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Toward the Linguistic Study of Writing Systems:
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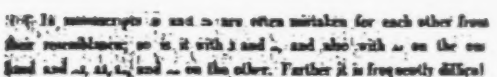
Whoever looks for "Writing" in a library catalog is soon reminded that the term is multiply ambiguous. I am concerned now not with penmanship, or literacy, or pedagogy, or style (though each of these is a subject intimately related to writing in its basic sense, which should be incorporated as a posterior part of grammatology), but with writing systems -- the sets of marks by which utterances are notated so as to be precisely reproducible in the absence of the notator or of the notator's instructions.[1]

It is astonishing how transparent writing has become -- I present two examples of what I mean. The figure shows an excerpt from the English translation of Theodor Nöldeke's Syriac grammar[2] that (in its last clause) claims the letters shin and yod "are not sufficiently discriminated" -- which is patently not true; one is a solid circle, the other a little spike. Now compare the German original.[3] A different, and inferior, typeface had been used for the Syriac, in which the two letters are (I can testify) very similar -- a big triangle versus a



In Handschriften sind sich oft zum Verwechseln ähnlich ܒ und ܟ ; und ܢ, auch wohl ܐ und ܥ, ܕ, ܪ, ܬ. Ferner ist oft ܐ von einfachem ܐ, zuweilen auch ܣ von einfachem ܣ schwer zu unterscheiden ; und ܒ sind sich auch in manchen Drucken all zu ähnlich; in Drucken werden ferner wohl ܣ und ܣ, ܐ und ܐ nicht genügend unterschieden

little triangle. What happened is simply that the translator -- who is inclined to be a bit more literal than I think necessary

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1. The latter qualification is intended to rule out the Inca quipu.

2. Compendious Syriac Grammar, tr. James A. Crichton (London, 1904), p. 3.

3. Kurzgefasste syrische Grammatik (Leipzig, 1880), p. 3.

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(as literal, one might say, as the ancient scholars who revised the Syriac version of the Bible into closer conformity with the Greek original[4]) -- has not noticed the form of the letters to be used in his edition, but thought only of either the page before him as he worked or of his own notion of what the letters look like. As a second example, an article appeared in the Chicago Sun-Times not long ago describing an educator's work with dyslexic children. One of the symptoms of the condition was described as the tendency to confuse the letters B, D, P, and Q -- printed as capital letters, while the problem is the subject's difficulty with the various reflections seen in lower-case b, d, p, and q. From these two examples, the lesson for linguists, and grammatologists, is clear: the appearance of writing cannot be overlooked.

Another sort of mistake results from romanticising the history of writing. The introduction to the article "Publishing, History of" in the 15th edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica states, "Writing was originally regarded not as a means of disseminating information but as a way to fix religious formulations or to secure codes of law, genealogies, and other socially important matters, which had previously been stored in a succession of human memories. Publishing could begin only after the monopoly of letters, often held by a priestly caste, had been broken, probably in connection with the development of the value of writing in commerce." This is simply wrong. Since long before the recent suggestions of the origin of writing in the clay impressions of herders' tally-tokens,[5] it has been known that the earliest documents (from 4th-millennium Mesopotamia) were of ephemeral economic, and not literary or cultic, content. Even those (like Eric Havelock)[6] who deny literary quality to the work of Mesopotamian writers must recognize that the ledgers in Linear B long predate the recording of the works of Homer.

In setting out to meld linguistics and grammatology, I am fortunate in having the Aramaic languages and their scripts as my purview. Aramaic happens to be attested over a nearly

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4. Cf. my "S----x and the Single Manuscript, the Joy of Philology, and Linguistic Morality (Evidence for Syntactic Change in Syriac)," Chicago Linguistic Society Parasession on Diachronic Syntax (Chicago, 1976), pp. 69-78.

5. See, e.g., D. Schmandt-Besserat, "The Earliest Precursor of Writing," Scientific American, June 1978, pp. 50-59.

6. Most of the texts are gathered in The Literate Revolution in Greece and Its Cultural Consequences (Princeton, 1982).

unparalleled span of time, in a number of forms (dialects?) that have been written in a considerable variety of scripts; and those scripts and their close allies have had the historical good fortune of being in the right spots to participate in a number of crucial junctures in the history of writing.

The first phenomenon I would like to look at from a linguistic point of view is probably the most important of all: the invention of the alphabet. For some decades now it has been fashionable to state that the Hebrew (Aramaic, Phoenician, Canaanite, Ugaritic) writing system is not an alphabet but a syllabary with unspecified vowels. This view, whose currency is due largely to my late teacher Jay Gelb,[7] arose partly because in his pervasive desire to systematize and categorize, he decreed that writing systems teleologically must pass through the stages logographic, syllabic, alphabetic, in order; and it wouldn't do to derive the syllabary of Ethiopia from an ancestral alphabet. There is a sense in which the 'syllabary' characterization of what I might as well call Canaanite writing applies, but a rather trivial rewording of the definition of "alphabet" makes it conform to the intuitive feeling that the Canaanite system indeed is one.

The non-alphabet view of Canaanite, coupled with what is either -- and unpleasantly in both cases -- considerable ignorance of Mesopotamian literature and culture, or else appalling anti-Semitism, has led to the claim that literature, and even rational thought in general, did not (could not) come into being until the Greek invention of vowels, hence the alphabet, hence true writing. I note this without the luxury of refutation, leaving that to Martin Bernal[8] among others.

But when we recognize that the Canaanites did use an alphabet, we can more adequately assign credit (not for the

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7. The primary reference is A Study of Writing (2d ed.; Chicago, 1963).

8. See "Black Athena Denied," Comparative Criticism 8 (1986): 3-69, and forthcoming works referred to there.

origin of literature or thought, of course, but) for this great invention. M. O'Connor[9] has introduced the notion of writing as the result of a "native speaker analysis" of language -- of an ethnoscience (not ethnolinguistics, that's something else) on a par with pharmacognosy, the traditional knowledge of the medicinal powers of plants.[10] I think it is agreed that the basic, most salient, unit of the stream of speech is the syllable -- not the segment, certainly not the distinctive feature -- and this is usually the scope of a unit in an ancestral script: note Chinese and Sumerian logograms, where the words recorded tended to be just one syllable long. Rebus writing leads to a more or less phonographic syllabary, and in Mesopotamia the unrelated Semitic language Akkadian could be notated with the characters devised for Sumerian, used both syllabically and logographically. Scholars -- philologists -- in ancient Mesopotamia compiled vast lists of characters, with definitions and pronunciations, bilingual ones and unilingual ones.[11] They are usually ordered semantically, but sometimes phonetically: CV syllables, for instance, could be grouped together by the initial consonant, for instance bu, bi, ba. Babylonian philologists had recognized the segment. But they did not isolate it. It was still necessary to specify a vowel for every consonant. Fortunately (one might say, though of course it is not coincidental), the classical Semitic languages have rather simple canonic forms for syllables -- CV, CV:, or CVC; there are no consonant clusters other than at syllable boundaries. Thus a syllabary with just CV and VC characters would be adequate to

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9. Preliminarily, in "Writing Systems, Native Speaker Analyses, and the Earliest Stages of Northwest Semitic Orthography," in The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake, 1983), pp. 439-465; more fully in Speaking, Writing, Sign, System (ms., 1986).

10. We might call it glottognosy leading to grammatognosy.

11. General orientations may be found in Miguel Civil, "Lexicography," in Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen on His Seventieth Birthday June 7, 1974, ed. S. J. Lieberman (Chicago, 1975; Assyriological Studies 20), pp. 123-157; and in Antoine Cavigneaux, "Lexikalische Listen" [in French], Reallexikon der Assyriologie 6/7-8 (1983): 609-641.

represent Akkadian. A single text is known which writes Aramaic in cuneiform syllabary,[12] and another in Egyptian Demotic.[13] These have proved quite difficult to interpret; in the former case largely because canonic form in Aramaic had evolved thanks to stress shift and vowel reduction, and many of the written vowels have to be ignored (rather as in Linear B). But back in normal Akkadian, there were also signs for the vowels alone, a, e, i, u, and these could be used to indicate the long vowels. They might on occasion even turn up to in effect verify short vowels; this is termed "plene" writing. And in one of the unrelated languages for which Akkadian cuneiform was adopted, namely Hurrian (which some scholars now suggest is an ancient relative of the modern Caucasian family),[14] it seems that nearly all vowels were written plene.[15] The adjacent consonants were still indicated by the syllabic character with the appropriate vowel, but because the vowel was also explicitly written, the vowel inherent in the syllable-character was essentially

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12. Most comprehensively treated by A. Dupont-Sommer, "La Tablette cunéiforme araméenne de Warka," Revue d'assyriologie 39 (1946): 35-62.

13. The study initiated by R. A. Bowman, "An Aramaic Religious Text in Demotic Script," Journal of Near Eastern Studies [JNES] 3 (1944): 219-231, with the cooperation of the Egyptologist C. F. Nims, has recently been taken up by Richard C. Steiner, again with Nims: see their "A Paganized Version of Psalm 20:2-6 from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," Journal of the American Oriental Society [JAOS] 103 (1983): 261-274; "You Can't Offer Your Sacrifice and Eat It Too: A Polemical Poem from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script," JNES 43 (1984): 89-114"; "Ashurbanipal and Shamash-Shum-Ukin: A Tale of Two Brothers from the Aramaic Text in Demotic Script [P. Amherst Eg. 63]," Revue biblique 92 (1985): 60-81 and sequel(s). The resumption of study of this document was occasioned when Robert K. Ritner, of the Chicago Demotic Dictionary, showed me the old photographs of it he had just come across -- which he was unaware had been misplaced for decades. I consulted Nims and mentioned the text to Steiner; the fruitful collaboration here documented resulted.

14. I. M. Diakonoff and S. A. Starostin, Hurro-Urartian as an Eastern Caucasian Language (in press), referenced in Diakonoff, "Hurro-Urartian Borrowings in Old Armenian," JAOS 105 (1985): 597-603, n. 13.

15. Information on Hurrian is as it was presented in seminars by Gene B. Gragg, University of Chicago to whom the following suggestion is also due.

redundant, and the only information carried therein was the nature of the consonant. (This is in fact the mirror image of the explanation of Canaanite writing as syllabic.) It seems, therefore, that Hurrian writing was just one crucial step away from being an alphabet -- wherein each character conveys information about just one segment.[16] (Until recently we might have said "just one phoneme" -- but recently it has been being noticed that the concept of phoneme may itself be an artifact of alphabetization.[17] Morris Halle[18] wasn't the first to notice that it's not the most efficient or effective way to analyze the speech stream,[19] and it isn't only his generative phonology that prefers to work with a feature system.[20])

We used to "know" that the development of the alphabet was stimulated by the example of monoconsonantal acrophonic Egyptian hieroglyphs adapted by Canaanite mine workers in the Sinai desert. Unfortunately, as more material is unearthed, and especially in the unlikely event that the latest essay in decipherment of the pseudo-hieroglyphs from Byblos proves accurate,[21] this scenario becomes less and less certain. But there is a tempting coincidence in time and space of Hurrian

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16. A. Morpurgo Davies, "Forms of Writing in the Ancient Mediterranean World," in The Written Word: Literacy in Transition, ed. Gerd Baumann (Oxford, 1986; Wolfson College Lectures 1985), pp. 51-77, at p. 61, suggests that this is an older, discredited view, but does not refute it.

17. References are gathered in O'Connor, Speaking, n. 1; note especially Y. Chao, "The Non-uniqueness of Phonemic Solutions of Phonetic Systems," in Readings in Linguistics I: The Development of Descriptive Linguistics in America 1925-1956, ed. Martin Joos (4th ed.; Chicago, 1966), pp. 38-54 (corrected reprint of 1934 original).

18. In The Sound Pattern of Russian (The Hague, 1959).

19. E.g., Chao, "Non-uniqueness."

20. See Geoffrey Sampson's discussion of the Korean alphabet, in Writing Systems (Stanford, 1985), ch. 7.

21. See my "The Decipherments of the Pseudo-Hieroglyphs from Byblos," paper presented at the 1987 North American Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics [NACAL], Los Angeles, to be published in Journal of Near Eastern Studies.

presence and the earliest traces of alphabetic writing. Is it possible that Canaanites knew about both Egyptian and Hurrian and took some features from both systems? Can Hurrians at Ugarit help account for the anomalous inclusion of letters for aleph plus the three vowels in the Ugaritic alphabet? Is it no more than coincidence that some of the features of the Aramaic language that typologically set it apart from the rest of Semitic correspond to traits of the Hurrian language, in patterns now familiar from the study of areal linguistics?[22] To support or refute this conjecture will require the cooperation of cuneiformist historians, for the material is scant and obscure. But it is tempting.

We are on slightly surer footing with the related question of "matres lectionis," letters in a Semitic alphabetic text that stand for long vowels rather than the usual consonant: y represents long [i], w represents long [u], h represents long [a]. This practice results -- in Aramaic first -- from the change of diphthongs to mid vowels. For instance, [ay] (written with y) became long [e], but the y was still written. This technique was adopted by the scribes who recorded Hebrew. But in Phoenician, where comparable phonological changes occurred, such vowel writings were never used. Can this also be attributed to Aramean familiarity with Hurrian voweling practice?

To get away from the Hurrians and into the Bible (where they are known as Horites), we may notice a case where morphological patterning (or etymology) is directly reflected in orthography. In the Aramaic portions of the Bible, namely a few chapters of Ezra and of Daniel (written in the fifth to second centuries B.C.), matres lectionis are used for the long vowels, essentially whether derived from diphthongs or not. But they are not used in words of Persian or Greek origin, that is, those whose vowel patterns do not conform to the language's morphological patterning. Here, then, is a case where the orthography is not just phonological, but morphological as well.[23]

The Greeks, of course, were the first to use consistent linear vocalization (with the vowels incorporated into the line of script). This term is to contrast with the familiar supralinear vocalization systems optionally used in Hebrew and Arabic for the specification of vowels. This system was devised

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22. This was discussed briefly in my "Toward a Sociolinguistic Prehistory of Aramaic," 1985 NACAL, Ann Arbor.

23. See my "Biblical Aramaic Orthography," paper presented at the 1985 meeting of the American Oriental Society [AOS], Middle Western Branch, Evanston.

by Syrian scholars for more clearly writing Syriac, the Aramaic liturgical language of many Eastern churches, whose orthography already incorporates many more matres lectionis (all long vowels must be notated, and all short [u]'s). But the language of religion and science took over many words from the Greek, where it was important to be able to transmit the short vowels as well; and the Greek vowel letters came to be added as desired above and below the lines of writing (in native words, too, of course); this was the model for the Hebrew and Arabic philologists who devised similar systems for their scripts.[24]

But there was one Aramaic language that managed to indicate all its vowels without adding to the inventory of signs. In Mandaic (which lost several consonants), letters y and w, and aleph, h, and ayin, came to be used for all vowels. And here, as at the beginning, is an example of the shapes of the letters being noteworthy. The consonants of the Mandaic script are written rather large and bulky -- by comparison with the vowels, all of whose symbols are small and almost insignificant. The vowels are all there, but it is the consonants that retain perceptual salience in the still-Semitic native speaker analysis.[25]

A frequent target of derision among Aramaists or writers on writing is the Pehlevi alphabet. This is a script, derived from a standard Aramaic one, used (the consensus is) to write a Persian language -- but not in Persian terms; rather, Aramaic words are used as logograms for Persian (just as Sumerian characters could be used in an Akkadian text to indicate an Akkadian word), and are pronounced in Persian. It is then completely irrelevant that, say, as many as seven ancestral letters have merged into a single shape -- for the letters no longer have phonetic significance at all. They merely constitute patterns to be read off in an unrelated language. (The same, I contend, is true of present-day English. Most familiar vocabulary is <u>not</u> read phonetically, but has to be memorized item by item. The advantage of English over Chinese or Japanese is that after a while the less common words <u>can</u> be identified purely from the rules of English spelling.)

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24. See S. Morag, <u>The Vocalization Systems of Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic: Their Phonetic and Phonemic Principles</u> (The Hague, 1962; Janua linguarum, series minor 13; J. B. Segal, <u>The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac</u> (London, 1953; London Oriental Series 2).

25. This was discussed in my "Contrastive Orthography: Syriac Dialects and 'Diascripts,'" 1985 meeting of the AOS, Ann Arbor.

Another language that adopted an Aramaic script (in this case Nabatean) is Arabic. The origins of Arabic orthography have been investigated in detail,[26] and the meager remains of Nabatean have been exhaustively studied, so we need merely note that Arabic script conforms beautifully to Classical Arabic morphophonemics. What I want to point out is simply that in fine Arabic printing (not what one finds done by a computer these days), there is usually no space between words -- not merely because the language inflects quite regularly (but many forms do not have consonant suffixes that would appear in the line), but because nearly every letter has a distinctive form at the end of a word. Spaces between words then become redundant and, sensibly, are omitted. One wonders why something similar didn't happen in Greek or Latin, languages where in early texts there are neither word spaces, word dividers, nor distinctive final forms -- nor even highly regular suffixing morphology to set off words. Maybe the Greeks weren't as great at writing as everyone thinks they were.

To come down to the present day, the language known as "Assyrian" and spoken originally throughout Kurdistan, but now largely transplanted to Baghdad, Israel, and several parts of the United States, is a close relative (not a direct descendant) of Classical Syriac. It haa evolved at least as much as the spoken Arabics have (in phonology, morphology, and syntax). Yet it is written in Classical Syriac orthography -- not because of a conservative spelling tradition (the few documents known from the 18th century are phonetically spelled),[27] as in English, but because American and English missionaries in the 1830s wanted to give the Syrian Christians a vernacular Bible and chose to etymologize rather than record the spoken language. This had the

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26. Werner Diem, "Untersuchungen zur frühen Geschichte der arabischen Orthographie," Orientalia 48 (1979): 207-257; 49 (1980): 67-106; 50 (1981): 332-383; 51 (1982): 357-404). According to D. O. Edzard, this monograph essentially reflects the views of the Munich Arabist Anton Spitaler.

27. Personal communication from R. D. Hoberman regarding sundry texts published by Yona Sabar.

advantage of conforming to the tradition, but the result of creating a very difficult script.[28]

I hope I have given some indication of how important it is to look at writing systems in a linguistic way: how books on writing should not be confined to accounts of how the forms of characters change as they move across space and time and languages. It is necessary to investigate how scripts interact with their languages, as well as how writing interacts with minds and civilizations. My remarks have been confined to one family of writings in one corner of the world. There are many more of each.

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28. See my "The Discovery of Modern Syriac," 1980 NACAL, San Francisco. H. P. Scanlin of the American Bible Society has informed me of the project to provide a Bible in Turoyo, a hitherto unwritten modern Aramaic language. It is being notated in an orthography based on Classical Syriac, rather than, say, a phonetic use of Syriac script or the roman letters used for it by linguists, at the request of the community for which the translation is intended.